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“Stories are seeds. We need to learn how to sow other stories about plants.”

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“Stories are seeds. We need to learn how to sow other stories about plants.”

ARNIKA PESELMANN: Natasha, thank you so much for taking the time—it is a great pleasure for us to have you with us in our conversation about vegetal storytelling. You are a dancer and a scholar trained in the life sciences and in anthropology and you have written a widely recognized sensory ethnography on protein modeling, published in your 2015 book, *Rendering Life Molecular: Models, Modelers, and Excitable Matter*. You demand, however, that we leave the scientific realm when thinking about plants as sentient, because, as you say, this “colonial” approach “evacuates the liveliness and sentience of the more-than-human world around us” (Myers, “Becoming Sensor” 77). Instead, you explore an “affective ecology” (ibid. 89). Together with dancer and filmmaker, Ayelen Liberona, you have developed the art project, *Becoming Sensor* (cf. Liberona and Myers) in which you create an “ungrid-able ecology” of an ancient oak savanna in a park in Toronto. It is meant “to explore how non-Indigenous people can become allies to Indigenous resurgence by experimenting with ways to detune the settler common sense that informs conventional ideas about the living world” (Liberona and Myers). One of

the aims is to develop “new ways of telling stories about lands and bodies” (Liberona and Myers). These new stories are meant to oppose anthropocentric thinking, including anthropocenic logics. You suggest disrupting these all-too-human approaches through “planthroposcenic actions” in the form of “plant-people conspiracies,” ways people might get onside with plants to “grow livable worlds for all” (Myers, “How to Grow”). These alternative political and decolonial modes of telling ecological stories, and the concepts you have developed, such as the Planthroposcene, are of particular interest to us for our special issue on “The Stories Plants Tell.” Before we go into more detailed questions, maybe you would like to tell us about your own story with plants; how did your perception of plants and your interactions with them develop and change over time?

NATASHA MYERS: Thanks so much for your question and this opportunity to share. So, there was a clear moment for me when I was abducted by the plants. It was when I was an undergraduate student in the biological sciences at McGill University. I took a class with a plant physiologist, Professor Rajdinder Dhindsa, and I just remember this remarkable moment when he was teaching us about how flowering plants respond to—and remember—daily shifts in red light; how plants can sense changes in day length so that they know when to flower. And I suddenly got it: plants were responding to the red hues of sunrises and sunsets. A resonance welled up in my body and imagination as I saw and felt plants collectively bowing to the sunrise and the sunset. I have understood photosynthesis differently since that moment: not as a set of light-activated chemical reactions, but as a kind of reverential “cosmic mattering” (Myers, “How to Grow”).

This bodily resonance with plants made so much sense to me. While I was studying plant biology as an undergraduate and later graduate student in the 1990s, I was also choreographing and performing with small dance companies in Montreal. I started to realize that the depth that I could bring to the questions of what a plant was and what a plant knows had to be explored outside of the lab. I started to learn gestures, movements, and choreography from the plants and embodied them to help me think through my research. I began to recognize that we needed more than the sciences to engage in meaningful encounters with plants. So, it has been since then that my own tissues have been deeply sensitized to plant form, to plant movement, to plant temporalities, their rhythms, and tempos.

FREDERIKE MIDDELHOFF: Forms of moving with and aligning ourselves with plants always involve questions about nonverbal communication and matters of representation. Maybe you could tell us how concepts such as “plant language” and the notion of plants as storytellers might inform your work. Is this something you find useful, or maybe also problematic?

NATASHA MYERS: Plants speak to people differently. The stories they tell can be deeply personal, local, contextual. They may not be for others to hear. Or they may be stories that need to be told out loud again and again. Plants speak directly to my body. I encounter plants first and foremost as gestural expressive dancers, creatively moving with and being moved by all the relations around them. The listening I have been developing requires embodied modalities and meditative engagement. It takes time. And an ability to let go of conventional ideas of time to learn the speeds and “slownesses,” the intergenerational and extended space-time of plant tempos and temporalities. It involves the work of being with a plant long enough to get a feel for their gesture; to get a feel for their forms, and how they are worlding relations all around them. These attunements allow me to listen for *and participate in* stories about the places plants are making, both right where they are rooted and far beyond; stories about their relationships with other plants, with the elements, and with other “elemental rearrangers,” including people (Myers, “Photosynthetic Mattering” 1). The stories are fundamentally relational: it matters who is doing the listening, and what they make it mean. This isn’t about finding out the truth of plant propositions, deciphering some universal code, but acknowledging the stories—both mundane and revolutionary—we co-create with them.

This listening requires deep work to alter and prepare one’s sensorium by detuning colonial norms and attentions. Disciplinary conventions make it hard to have a conversation about whether plants have language or to ask how they communicate, or how we can communicate with them. We need different grounds for this conversation. We need especially to start with the shared understanding that our sensing involves more than the five senses defined by science; that sensing is relational and makes worlds; that there is no such thing as an environment “out there”; that our sensorium, articulated in relation with other beings, is already more-than-human; that it enfolds our intuitions, memories, dreams, hopes, desires, pleasures, and horrors; and, that what we sense and what we cannot sense is conditioned by norms and

relations of power shaped by forces like colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy. We also must remember that these are the very forces that teach us that our bodies and senses are not to be trusted.

So, one of the most important things we must do if we want to hear the stories plants tell is to learn to lean into our senses and tune into our intuitions, those feelings that rise up in our tissues when we resonate with phenomena around us, including phenomena that we can't otherwise see or touch. So obsessed with an objectivity dedicated to removing "human error," we reach for machines or algorithms to replace and so delegitimize our sensing. Sensing plant stories requires so much unlearning: unlearning approaches that alienate us from our more-than-human kin and render them as objects and resources; unlearning mechanistic logics and the stark boundaries we assume between bodies; unlearning what we think sensing is, what we think communication is, what we think counts as a story, as a storyteller, a listener, or a witness. And probably the most blasphemous to academia: this conversation about plant stories is impossible without acknowledging the sacred, the numinous, the subtle, and energetic elements of plant/people relations.

And yes, "the sacred" is an uncomfortable concept for us in academia. It's been a complicated one for me, too, a white settler growing up on stolen lands in so-called Canada. My ancestors were Jews who fled wars and pogroms in Europe to settle in Toronto in the early twentieth century. In the early 1970s, my parents rebelled against their suburban Jewish upbringing by dropping out of high school and traveling to Dharamsala to meet the Dalai Lama. My parents sent me to Buddhist meditation camp rather than Hebrew school, and I had profound experiences with meditation while also learning to question Zionism, patriarchal religions, and what people meant by invoking God or the Divine. These days I am more comfortable recognizing the sacred in my work, even if talking about it makes others uncomfortable. Nico Cary, an American artist whose altars and performances create spaces for holding climate grief, defines the sacred in a way that helps me understand it better for myself: he approaches the sacred as the simple act of treating others, including more-than-human others, how they want to be treated. That feels just right to me. And it hinges on really listening to others, including the plants for what would count as respectful, reciprocal *relating*.

ARNIKA PESELMANN: I wonder what kind of concepts or methods a sensory ethnography can give to you—or does it need to be expanded?

NATASHA MYERS: I engage ethnography as if anthropology were an art, not a social science. And yet, there is nothing innocent about this method. Anthropology's very impulse, its curiosities, its questions are colonial and grounded in white supremacy. Despite all sorts of efforts to decolonize the field, the colonial, extractive form persists. In anthropology we are supposed to reckon with our positionality and privilege, with our relationship to whiteness. I keep wondering, however, whether a discipline like anthropology could be transformed: this is the discipline which, in contrast to so many of the social sciences, takes other ways of knowing, listening, and storytelling so seriously, a discipline which has been so capacious questioning ethics and reinventing methods. What if instead of fetishizing, collecting, and capitalizing on other people's plant practices, we started learning how to listen to the plants like our own ancestors did? How would this change the questions, the methods, the forms of writing, and the pedagogies of anthropology?

I am learning so much working with Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Wyandot, Mi'kmaw, and Métis elders and earth-workers who are taking leadership in the restoration of the lands in Toronto's so-called High Park on Dish With One Spoon Wampum Lands. One of the things I am learning is that for there to be a relation between a person and a plant, there must be reciprocity. If you are seeking a story, what are you going to give back to the plant? Plant stories are not there for the taking. Stories come when you are in good relation. The question becomes how to get into good relation with the plants and land to learn how to follow these powerful teachers and guides? This is not about appropriating Indigenous stories or methods, but waking settlers up to what counts as a good relation here on these lands.

I know that these conversations are hard to have in academia. But truly, if we are going to begin to hear the stories plants are trying to tell us, we must get over ourselves and acknowledge that they are not just beings worthy of address: they deserve our reverence. Plants are the ones leading the way in all matters of earth, climate, and trauma healing. We often get stuck contemplating the radical difference of plants: "They are so different. They are so other. They are so much less than us. We could not possibly communicate to them." I want us to start from the humbling realization that we are *of the plants*: they entrained our sensoria, teaching us to smell and taste, inspiring our aesthetics, our senses of form, intoxicating, adorning, and nourishing our

bodies, infrastructuring our communities and fueling economies. They made us human.

A listening practice can start with our effort of rendering our bodies more available to move with and be moved by the plants who have been waiting for us to catch up with them all this time. My own practice involves training myself to be receptive enough to let the plants lead me in my activism, theory-making, and art-making. I've been experimenting with ways to support others learning to listen to plants. I like to bring this practice of detuning the colonial logics of our sensorium into my pedagogy, especially teaching courses on the anthropology of the senses. I created a meditation to help people sense plants otherwise, to help them cultivate their "inner plant" (Myers, "Sensing Botanical Sensoria"). It's a hypnagogic visualization that lures a listener to feel through plant forms, processes, and movements. So instead of trying to explain or make an argument for the creativity of plant sensing, this meditation helps people feel it in their tissues.

FREDERIKE MIDDELHOFF: Regarding matters of attunement, you have also dwelled on concepts such as phytomorphism and insisted on a need to "vegetalize our sensorium" and our all-too colonial ways of making sense (Myers, "Becoming Sensor" 76). Conceptual, reworked terminology and twisty metaphors are thus an important part of your idea of attunement, but you always approach these games of metaphor in material-semiotic ways, as you acknowledge that we need to build conspiracies with plants and literally cultivate our own inner plant. So, how does the metaphorical inform your tuning-in with more-than-human languages?

NATASHA MYERS: The words really matter. While I was in the laboratory in late 1990s struggling with the ways that molecular genetics was narrating plant life, I was starting to experiment with other stories, both through dance and in writing. I looked at the data and realized I could tell different stories in order to thwart the deterministic impulse of genetics. It's not easy to rethink the core mechanistic narrative of the life sciences while in the laboratory training to be a scientist! And yet I realized that something happens when you begin your narration with the conviction that all beings are sentient and creative. Take the example of plant tropisms, say phototropism, the phenomena of plants growing towards the light. You can have a functionalist explanation that enrolls a whole series of mechanisms activated by light as an

external stimulus, including a cost/benefit analysis of the energetic economy that drives that organism towards efficiency. But we can narrate tropisms differently: as vegetal intentionality practicing desire without lack, as curiosity, exploration, play; as experiments with light and gravity and vibration. You can start to see plants as curious practitioners and as *elemental rearrangers* at a planetary scale, rather than as machines running code scripts (Myers, “Photosynthetic Mattering”). A different world can be storied.

Neo-Darwinism’s just-so-stories of evolutionary prowess are so pervasive, they even lurk inside stories we often think of as liberatory. Neo-Darwinian stories constrain how we understand plants significantly (cf. Myers and Hus-tak). I think of these stories as lullabies. They are lulling us into a stupor, a deep slumber, that makes it impossible to dream life otherwise. I wonder: What could wake us up to other stories? What if you could do ecology—which I want to mean beholding the “we” of collective being—without neo-Darwinism? What I’m exploring is the difference it makes to expose and reject the functionalism and the universalizing, flattening metrics of the sciences. Yes, it sounds blasphemous to our all-too-well-trained ears, and I love how uncomfortable it makes people feel when this consensus in science is breached.

My scholar-activism, then, is about activating that rupture; breaking that conventional sense-making structure. Left unexamined our “common sense” will continue to render these plants as objects, subject to our whim. It takes some effort to recognize and root out these narrative forms at work within the plant stories people still find so salient. And one of the reasons I am looking towards artists is that they are not constrained by the same narrative forms as scientists. Sure, artists also fall into similar ruts, especially when they get caught in the thrall of science with all its expertise, status, and technology. But there is room for invention in art and I want there to be room in academia for the ruptures in praxis that art makes possible.

FREDERIKE MIDDELHOFF: You are looking for alternative methods to tease out and express the stories you want to tell with and about plants. Can you give us more details on how you make use of sensorial, kinesthetic, multimedia practices interlinking academic writing, photography, smelling protocols, and activist approaches?

NATASHA MYERS: The renderings that I make with my longtime friend and collaborator Ayelen Liberona in our project *Becoming Sensor* are meant to generate ecological data, but not the kind of data forms we are used to. Meaningful

data for us must encompass the fullness of an affectively-charged embodied encounter with the land. Our experience with the plants over the seasons and the years on one small patch of land in so-called High Park are all part of an archive, part of an “ungrid-able ecology” we have gathered to re-story these already deeply storied lands. These lands have been storied since creation by Indigenous people. Now they are storied most prominently by settlers and their sciences. At the core of this work is an understanding that the ecological sensorium settlers inherit from the sciences has already pre-figured these lands as a collection of discrete species where nature is figured as resource. Ecological restoration projects here calculate ecosystem services and hinge on chemical-intensive protocols. And so, at the core of our artwork is a desire to rupture the metrics, the norms, and the grids that enforce colonial forms of land management; to “make strange” the scientific impulse long enough to allow other stories to thrive.

How can detuning the sciences shift the stories we tell about plants? It changes everything. Suddenly it's not about organisms' energetic efficiency in complex environments; it's about relations of power that involve people. Think about the movements of plants across empires—all those plants were extracted from deeply embedded relationships with people. We need to talk about these forms of dispossession in ecology: plants and people wrenched out of relation.

And so, turning down the volume on scientific stories allows us to alter how settlers *apprehend* these lands, where apprehension is understood not only as a perception but also as a form of capture. As activism this artwork is about activating an altered settler sensorium, disrupting ways of sensing and storying lands to help white settlers see the dispossessions their privileges leverage. We approach this as a first step towards becoming better allies to ongoing Indigenous resurgence and sovereignty projects.

We engage art-making as a way of tuning in to the land to hear stories that would otherwise be muted or ignored. The protocols and the practices we developed helped us to ground ourselves on the land long enough to be able to listen. And, powerfully, one of the first demands for reciprocity that we heard from the oaks was for us to get into good relation with Indigenous earth-workers to support their land sovereignty work here on their ancestral lands. So now, after a few years of working with an amazing group of people who have gathered to form the Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle, I can

understand art-making as our first step in a slow and deep form of land acknowledgment. It was a practice that seeded our relations with Indigenous land protectors and earth-workers, and also taught us how to be in reciprocal relation with the land.

Plant stories are deeply political and are shot through with power. Plants play an integral role in stories of Indigenous genocide, transatlantic slavery, and the exploitation of migrant labor. The fact that Dish With One Spoon lands were enclosed as an urban park for white settler leisure and pleasure must be counted among the violences of colonization here; parks in settler states are by definition sites of dispossession, invented and designed to keep Indigenous people off the land. What members of the Circle have taught me most poignantly is how parks and their policies are obstacles to the land-based learning and ceremony that are essential for Indigenous people healing from the intergenerational effects of colonial violence.

FREDERIKE MIDDELHOFF: In an interview published in 2020, you mentioned that “the stories we need to be reading are those that can activate and help us grow liveable worlds. These are the stories being told by Black, Indigenous, people of color, artists, activists, writers, scholars, gardeners, earth-workers and their allies” (Lomeña, Myers, “Seeding Planthroposcenes”). Shortly beforehand, the interviewer had brought up Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* (2018)—which has become a popular novel not only in literary plant studies communities. But you said that this is not what you are looking for because the “plant-people” in the novel are “effectively swallowed up and destroyed by a world committed to extractive capital” (Lomeña, Myers, “Seeding Planthroposcenes”). So, is there any kind of fictional work out there that you think tells a story that is active and activating in the sense you envision?

NATASHA MYERS: The real work lies in listening to the people who refuse to let colonization disrupt the depth of their sacred conspiracy with plants. The most compelling writing for me is coming from Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, a Nishnaabeg writer, artist, musician, and poet from Alderville First Nation, whose brilliant works of theory, of fiction, poetry, and song are a call for Indigenous resurgence and land-based learning. I am moved especially by her writing on sugar maples, and her recent novel, *Noopiming: The Cure for White Ladies*, whose experimental form opens up and transforms what we think a novel is, or what a story can do to the world. Her writing speaks directly to her kin, and yet non-Indigenous readers can experience in her works a

deep rupture in what we take as given, opening us up to feel the traumas and injustice of colonization, and reminding us that we should all be grieving the harms white privilege imposes on Black and Indigenous lives.

There are also powerful stories about plants being told by Black studies scholars around land-based reparations and food justice for those whose ancestors were enslaved. Katherine McKittrick, Tiffany Lethabo King, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, among others, teach us how land dispossession and anti-blackness has been structured into food systems, farms, cities, and gardens. They help me see multiple dispossessions in the racial capitalism of slavery: enslavement and land theft severed Black and Indigenous people's relationships with the plants of their homelands and forced enslaved people into injurious relations with plants on plantations.

Reading these scholar-activists helps detune settler sensoria and colonial common sense about land, plants, and capitalism. These are not feel-good stories, but holding these stories is part of the essential work we need to do too so that we can remind all the white people who think they are doing good by creating pollinator gardens in their wealthy neighborhoods to save the bees, that environmental justice heals nothing if it hinges on racial injustice. What we need now is to tear down the fences enclosing private gardens on stolen lands in settler states (and, as in the case in Europe, gardens grown with stolen wealth) to make room for BIPOC communities to rekindle their relations with land. We need to hear the stories that show us how the flourishing of Black and Indigenous lives is integrally bound up in the flourishing of the bees and the healing of the land.

Stories are seeds. We need to learn how to sow other stories about plants. The stories I want to read are about people who learn how to conspire with the plants to heal our relations with one another and with the earth. We need to learn how to get onside with plants to grow worlds that are livable *for all*. And so critically, for a Planthropocene to take root, for a thickening of plant/people solidarities, we need to dismantle the economies, infrastructures, and relations that uphold white privilege and power. We need to learn to recognize that human and more-than-human futures demand we all step into our responsibilities to the land and to reimagining our communities and relationships, starting in our gardens.

FREDERIKE MIDDELHOFF AND ARNIKA PESELMANN: Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts and insights, that was really incredibly exciting.

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